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Dee McGonigle

Penn State New Kensington

Kathleen Mastrian

Penn State New Kensington

Nedra Farcus

Penn State New Kensington

Renee M. Eggers

Penn State New Kensington

Linda Shoop

Penn State New Kensington

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Academic Leadership Journal

Nurturing Faculty: An Old Concept?

Dr. Dee McGonigle, Dr. Kathleen Mastrian, Ms. Nedra Farcus,

Dr. Renee M. Eggers, and Dr. Linda Shoop

Penn State, New Kensington

Recruiting and retention are the focus of many college campuses in this fiercely, competitive educational market. Advertisements depicting caring faculty and a nurturing environment abound. The camaraderie that is touted in these ads is amiable and even ideal. However, the academic culture for the faculty is not always so caring and nurturing. It is clear that if you want to have nurtured students, then you must nurture your faculty. Satisfied faculty who feel energized, supported, and appreciated in their daily academic endeavors are better able to pass along these same feelings to their students. If the faculty is nurtured, then it is easy to see the flow of nurturance from administration to faculty to students and back again. This article explores the value of sustained, nurturing interaction in that most basic unit of human relationships, partners or dyads (teacher/learner, teacher/staff, teacher/administrator, learner/staff, learner/administrator, or administrator/staff) in a culture that prizes interdependence, self-reliance, and team camaraderie.

A nurturing environment can be thought of as an encapsulated energy field. That is, nurtured faculty who feel satisfied and valued are energized by positive interaction experiences with administrators. This energy is carried to the faculty-student dyad interaction. As students feel valued, and thus are satisfied in their interactions with faculty, the energy within the capsule builds. Students are cooperative and responsive to faculty and this response serves to re-energize faculty and increase their job satisfaction. Administrators interacting with energized faculty and students can feed off this energy as well to help them sustain the nurturing environment. However, if faculty-administration interactions drain energy from the field, this depletes the energy available for faculty-student interactions and the environment is in danger of losing its nurturing potential.

Support services, professional development monies, and salaries are shrinking in the current academic climate. Faculty, however, are expected to increase their work output. This seemingly tireless bastion of American higher education is expected to remain undaunted in the face of difficult teaching situations while juggling funding, publication, and research pressures, while adding virtual teaching episodes, managing increasing student numbers in the classroom and providing advice and counsel to students outside the classroom. These neglected academicians are also expected to contribute to student life on campus, thus facilitating the transition of student to professional. Faculty are expected to provide a collegiate experience that contributes to both social and intellectual development of students by fostering interpersonal, leadership, and critical thinking skills in a nurturing and caring educational culture. In academe, the learner/student, our consumer, is held in high-esteem while the merits of the faculty are often overlooked or taken for granted. We understand that without students there would not be academic units for faculty, however, conversely without faculty, there would not be academic units for students. Those skilled academicians who are generally starved for the same experiences in their work world, must provide the educating, nurturing, coaching, and mentoring experiences to their students.

Administrators are beginning to recognize the need to nurture faculty. The National League for Nursing's CEO, Ruth D. Corcoran (2001), stated "While there is no greater reward than being part of a young person's growth and development, our faculty need nurturing, and support, and lifelong opportunities for learning." The authors believe that this nurturing can take on many forms. Coaching and mentoring and other valuing behaviors designed to develop a mutually respectful learning community are particularly effective. Just as retention and recruitment are concerns about a student population, they should also be concerns about faculty. In the Chancellor's Report to the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia (1999), he stated "We need to nurture our faculty and staff — give them the support they need to serve, to grow and to excel. Put aside infrastructure, buildings, etc. Our people make our national reputation. It is the quality of our people that attracts other quality people — and high-achieving students." Rhea Paul (1997) wrote an article on

Faculty development: Nurturing our future.

Paul suggests that because of "conflicting demands on their time and attention, many new faculty feel confused, torn, even paralyzed by indecision." She asks how can leaders "ameliorate these stresses and conflicts?" The authors believe that this is the challenge facing academic administration. The leaders of our learning communities must

provide a nurturing environment for the faculty in order to guarantee a nurturing environment for the students. Faculty can become stressed when they are not nurtured and stress in the workplace can be very harmful to the work culture. According to Swenson (1999), it has been estimated that stress related outcomes cost organizations 300 billion dollars each year because of decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and increased job turnover.

Nurturing faculty is a key to developing a nurturing environment for students. McGonigle (2001) describes Sustainable Nurturance for the Academic Populace (SNAP) as a set of collaborative processes to support vision based planning for learning community development. The learning community consists of everyone, faculty, students, staff, and administrators. Every member of the learning community must assess the learning community's environments and seek activities in which individuals' values are nurtured while their talents are enhancing the community as a whole. Let faculty apply their passions while working. If administrators support the learning community and nurture their faculty, the faculty's meaning and passion will shine through to other members of the learning community.

Nurturance has many meanings. According to the Wordsmyth English Dictionary-Thesaurus (2000), nurturing is to "encourage the growth and development of or to provide training for; teach". This publication uses words such as cultivate, foster, sustain, educate, tutor, develop, and support. A second definition offered is the act or process of encouraging and promoting growth, development, or education and the associated descriptive wording includes guidance, sustenance, tutelage, and encouragement. In Webster's Dictionary (1913 Edition), nurturing is defined as the "act of nourishing; education; training, or to educate; to bring up or to train". As evidenced by these very definitions, faculty have the responsibility to nurture in their daily interactions with students. Faculty socially engineer their students through nurturing educational experiences. Therefore, it is extremely important that faculty reside in nurturing environments that in turn have the potential to foster nurturance for students. Students may not realize the power of their interactions. They, too, possess the ability to nurture faculty. All too often, faculty sense that the students are not bringing the stamina to the learning dyad that is critical to the development of a strong and successful academic environment. What faculty may not realize, however, is that the disappointing student responses may be a reflection of the academic culture in general.

There was a time when employees felt that corporate America would provide lifetime job security. This notion is no longer valid given our recent history and current employment climate. However,

in academe, with tenure there is still a strong commitment on the part of the employer to the employee. The employee is expected to share in that commitment. In an ideal situation, tenure signifies a strong commitment, however, resources to honor this commitment — networking, developmental monies, counseling, mentoring, career path options, and flexibility — are becoming scarce. When an administrator is faced with budget shortfalls and has to find ways to cut expenses, it is critical that he/she involves all stakeholders, particularly faculty, in the process. As involved parties are able to reach consensus, they are more likely to understand the need for change and not react negatively to it. Every effort should be made to preserve the nurturing environment for faculty so that energy is not diverted from the faculty- student interactions.

Consider a concrete example. Jane P. is a full-time faculty member in a University. She has an 8-year-old daughter with a learning disability. Jane and her husband are planning to enroll their daughter in a special school in the fall. Unfortunately, there is no busing provided to the special school. Jane's husband, who works 30 miles away, can easily transport their daughter to school in the morning. Jane, however, will need to provide transportation home at 3 o'clock. Jane is scheduled to teach a class from 3 to 4:30 PM on Mondays and Wednesdays. She shares this dilemma with the department head.

On the surface, this seems like a problem that is easily solved by changing faculty assignments to accommodate Jane's reasonable request. If Jane has to keep the course as scheduled, she may be stressed and concerned about her daughter during the class time. Her stress will drain potential nurturing energy out of the interaction with students. If the administrator changes the schedule, some other faculty member will be affected by the change. Employees without families may view family friendly work policies as special treatment. The administrator needs to be certain that the change is engineered in a win-win manner. Perhaps Jane can take on a 5-day schedule or an evening or Saturday class in exchange for the release time at 3 o'clock. The affected faculty member should be included in the negotiation for the trade-off to preserve the nurturing environment.

Living should take place during work hours, not after. Students are asking about work-life balance especially since work is such an important part of life. An increase in academic productivity and faculty happiness is worth pursuing if we are serious about

developing and supporting other people. Administration must listen to faculty as well as students. Work and life values should

be harmonious as compared to yesteryear where most did not consider work as something that could be enjoyable and rewarding to one's life.

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